

been skilled enough to weave in the criticisms Luther raises time and again against various other mystics.

Scotland is still largely a Protestant country and mysticism is still largely a bogey-word among Protestants. Hamm forces the conversation back open. And with the conversation open, a whole series of questions demand to be asked. If Luther was a mystic of a certain type, might that strain of the tradition warrant another, more sympathetic reading? And if that reading takes place, what impact might it have on the way Protestant traditions understand themselves and their relationship to the Roman Catholic traditions from which Protestantism sprang? Could ecumenical dialogue begin to take on the character of the 'pastoral care' Hamm describes in Chapter Seven? If Protestants are truly in so great a debt to monasticism, how might this revelation help them navigate the oft confusing encounters with new monastic communities forming in their midst? Might one be able to better see how these communities actually fulfill the Reformation vision in a way that church communities based solely around the horizontal relationship between humans and God do not? These are not Hamm's explicit questions, but they can and should be asked if Hamm's account of Luther's early theology has merit.

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Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), pp. xii + 188, ISBN 9780802827388. £16.99

Kilby's new book presents most Balthasarian scholars with an unfamiliar situation, namely by offering a (very) critical stance on Balthasar. As Kilby points out in the introduction, Balthasar is one of those theologians who stirs in their readers an overwhelming feeling of admiration, and leave little room for criticism. The lack of space for critical engagement is not just a consequence of the complexity or sheer length of Balthasar's work, Kilby claims, but also comes from

the position he assumes when writing theology, that of an omniscient narrator. This charge might seem surprising to most systematic theologians, who tend to adopt a similar perspective in their works, pretending to know more about God than they actually can, but Kilby insists Balthasar does not play by the rules and places himself above tradition, writing if not through God's eyes, then certainly from an ivory tower that allows him to have the illusion of a comprehensive overview.

Kilby's reading draws on the main works of the Balthasarian canon, but also on major critical works like those of Ben Quash and Tina Beattie. As the argument unfolds it becomes increasingly convincing by connecting Balthasar's life and his singular relationship with the Roman Catholic church (Chapter 2); with the general metaphors of his opus – the picture and the play (Chapter 3); and his structural motives – fulfilment and circle (Chapter 4); as well as looking more deeply into the particularities of his theologies of the doctrine of the Trinity and gender (Chapters 5 and 6). In contrast to Balthasar's narrative style, Kilby's argument takes a dialogical form dealing with the hypothetical objections of the enamoured Balthasarian reader.

If in the first chapter, Kilby sets the stage for her critique by explaining the difficulties such an enterprise faces, then the second chapter traces the penchant for seeing the whole that is predominant in Balthasar's approach to theology, expressed in his very existence at the margins of the church. Kilby builds her case not purely on Balthasar's absence from Vatican II, or his break with the Jesuits, but on several other particularities of his life. The image of Balthasar emerging at the end of the chapter is that of an isolated man, living outside the polis and who, for this reason, can be under the impression that he has a better view of the city.

For Balthasar's admirers, this peripheral existence could act as a justification entitling him to make a claim for objectivity rather marring him as an outcast, and thus he turns out to be a 'Desert Father'-like figure. Aware of this ambiguity, Kilby shifts the focus from Balthasar's life to his work, aiming to show the inherent weaknesses of a bird's eye perspective for theology. In Chapter 3, she identifies two main metaphors Balthasar uses to describe his approach: the picture and the play. Underlying both of them is a conviction that theology should be

done by respecting and acknowledging the human condition, where nothing can be known fully but only as fragments. Kilby agrees with Balthasar on this point, but she then reveals the numerous instances where Balthasar transgresses his own rule and presents the reader with the image of the whole. This ‘performative contradiction’ is deepened by the fourth chapter, in which Kilby captures Balthasar’s constructive strategies. She sees that beneath the metaphors of the play and picture are two structural motifs: the fulfilment and circle, suffering from a similar misuse. They are both legitimate theological motifs, but in Balthasar’s case they substantiate once more the gap between the declared principles and the actual practice.

Kilby’s next move is to point out how this bird’s eye perspective distorts key theological topics. She selects the examples of two highly debated topics: the doctrine of the Trinity (Chapter 5) and gender (Chapter 6). Despite the intrinsic risk that Balthasar’s vision runs for divinising suffering by bringing the cross inside the Trinity, Kilby appreciates Balthasar’s contribution to the topic, especially his ‘development of a mission Christology’ (p. 98). The same cannot be said about Balthasar’s understanding of gender. Kilby accuses Balthasar not just of a certain *parti pris* about women as passive elements, but, more importantly, of attempting to develop his gender bias into an ecclesiological model. Many reasons can be found for Balthasar’s prejudice, including his upbringing or his relationship with Adriane von Speyr, but the fact that he does not present any argument for this choice reinforces Kilby’s critique that Balthasar writes as someone ‘who can then expound Scripture, tradition, and dogma to us in the light of this already known inner structure’ (p. 146).

In the seventh and final chapter, Kilby aims to explain what she considers to be the right way of doing theology. Here she contrasts Balthasar to Barth and Aquinas, emphasising their approaches as rational and dialogical, while Balthasar’s is expository, cherry picking, and always pretending to be right. By ending on this note, the book is able to overcome the peril of a dry argument, unveiling itself to be not only a significant contribution in the field of Balthasarian studies but a welcome counterweight to the eulogies surrounding Balthasar, and a much needed contribution to a wider discussion wishing to define a theological methodology.

Kilby's book is exceptionally well structured and unfolds very clearly. However, as a side note, one might ask whether the analysis of another structural pattern of Balthasar's thinking – that of the plant – would not have thrown a complementary light on Kilby's argument. As Mario Saint-Pierre points out, Balthasar's theology is deeply influenced by Goethe's botanic thought, more precisely by the Goethean principle that the seed of the plant contains in itself the future development of the entire plant (Mario Saint-Pierre, *Beauté, bonté, vérité chez Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Paris: Cerf, 1998). On this basis Balthasar can claim to be able to put together the most disparate fragments of Christian tradition and get a glimpse of the entire edifice. This botanical metaphor does not contradict Kilby's central point, namely that Balthasar arbitrarily manipulates the pieces of the puzzle to make them fit together as he imagines the whole should be, yet it portrays Balthasar more like a detective whose goal is to reconstruct the event with the evidence he can find. This means that Balthasar's description of the external walls of the city comes from the interpretation he assigns to the traces left by those who have travelled outside the city. In this way Balthasar is more clearly consistent with his own methodology. He does not see the wholeness through the eyes of God, but rather bases it on his intuition and imagination.

Nonetheless, and regardless of how harsh Kilby's criticism might sound to those who are attracted to Balthasar's creativity, her book offers a helpful introduction to some of the most difficult issues in Balthasar's theology. Even though written from a (very) critical perspective, Kilby's book strengthens Balthasar's unique position inside the pantheon of twentieth-century theologians.

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